Chinese Medieval Versions of *Sleeping Beauty*

*Introduction*

Chinese versions of *Sleeping Beauty* (ATU 410) are not mentioned in the international type indices of folktales (ATU; AaTh); nor are they included in Wolfram Eberhard’s (1937) and Ding Naitong’s (Ting 1978; Ding 2008) indices of Chinese folktales. The earliest *Sleeping Beauty* accounts date back to the fourteenth century (Neemann 2007). However, the imperial anthology, or encyclopaedia, *Tai ping guang ji* (Extensive Records of the Taiping [Xingguo] Era [hereafter TPGJ], compiled in the tenth century) contains two versions of the story that strikingly resemble European variants of *Sleeping Beauty*: first in the 33rd *juan* (volume) (*Immortals XXXIII*), where it is called *Shen Yuanzhi*, then in the 69th *juan* (*Immortal Ladies XIV*), where it is called *Zhang Yunrong*.

Both versions were written in the ninth century: *Shen Yuanzhi* is included in the *Xian Zhuan Shi Yi* (Lost and Found Biographies of Immortals) by the eminent Daoist writer Du Guangting (ca. 850–933), and *Zhang Yunrong* is one of Pei Xing’s (825?–880) famous *Chuanqi* (Marvellous Tales). The *Xian Zhuan Shi Yi* itself, as well as the *Chuanqi*, are by now lost and only fragments of them survive in later anthologies such as TPGJ; however, both books were reconstructed by Chinese scholars, who compiled the remaining fragments (Du Guangting 1974; Pei Xing 2000).

The following table compares the main outline of the plot with the description of the plot in ATU:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese plot</th>
<th>ATU</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An attendant of the emperor’s concubine learns from a Daoist master that she is destined to die young; the Daoist takes pity on the girl and gives her a magic pill</td>
<td>“[…] (Announced by a frog [B211.7.1, B493.1]) a daughter is born to a royal couple. A fairy (wise woman) who has not been invited to the celebration (baptism) utters a curse</td>
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1 Chuanqi became the common term for Tang romantic fiction.
that, as he says, will prevent her soul from leaving the body after her death. She would remain in a ‘dormant’ state for one hundred years, at which time she would be revived. She swallows the pill and dies shortly after. Her mistress orders her body to be put in a large sepulchre at the imperial palace.

One hundred years pass, and the girl revives. The narrative in juan 33 ends at this point. The details of the following chain of events are known only through juan 69: One hundred years later, the same Daoist master induces a virtuous official whose name is Xue Zhao to enter the ancient palace. Xue Zhao leaps over the overgrown wall in the forest, meets the soul of the dead girl, marries her and spends a few days and nights in her chamber.

She is eventually restored to life and the couple live happily ever after.

At the end of the appointed time, a youth (prince) breaks through the hedge [N711.2] and awakens the princess with a kiss [D735, D1978.5] (he impregnates her; she gives birth to two children, one of whom sucks the fiber out of her finger and thus disenchants her).

In some variants the prince takes his wife and children to his family. During his absence the evil mother-in-law asks the cook to slaughter and roast the woman and the children. The cook disobeys, and the mother-in-law demands that the three be thrown into a tub full of poisonous toads and snakes. Unexpectedly the prince returns home, and the mother-in-law herself jumps into the tub.”

It is obvious that the Chinese version contains not only the main plot elements of ATU 410, but also some very specific motifs, e.g. the forest as obstacle.

Unlike the European examples, in the Chinese versions the Beauty does not fall asleep, she temporarily dies, just as the heroine of ATU 709: Snow White, and her
revival is due to the ingestion of a magic pill before her death\(^2\). In both cases, the name of the Chinese Sleeping Beauty is Yunrong (lit. ‘Cloudy Look’), but her surname varies: in the 33\(^{rd}\) juan it is Zhao, in the 69\(^{th}\) juan it is Zhang. The main donor in both versions is a Daoist master, whose surname is Shen. The story revolves around his magical abilities, and the character of Yunrong is used to illustrate them.

Both stories seem to have a common origin; either that or Du’s version could originate from Pei’s, as only Pei’s version contains the ending of the story\(^3\). The origin of Pei’s version of the story of Yunrong may have been oral or written, and obviously has roots in oral tradition. This article is an attempt to prove that Pei Xing’s tale and the version composed by Du Guangting can be classified as ATU 410, and to show the possible reasons for the transformation of the supposed original folktale.

I. Summaries of the two stories

Here I shall provide detailed summaries of both versions.

**Zhang Yunrong**

from the *Marvellous Tales* by Pei Xing\(^4\)

At the end of the Yuanhe era (806–820), Xue Zhao, an assistant of the Pinglu county ruler, following his inner sense of justice, releases a man who has killed someone in order to avenge his mother. For this action, Xue Zhao is banished to the north-western boundaries of the empire. On his way to exile, in the village of Sanxiang a friend of his, Old Tian from the Mountains (who turns out to be Master Shen) sets Xue free, expressing admiration for his righteousness and courage\(^5\), and gives him a magic pill that does not only have medicinal properties but can also make people live without eating grains. He then directs Xue Zhao to an abode where he can take refuge and find a beautiful young lady.

Xue Zhao enters a forest, and behind old trees and lush bamboo he finds a wall of the abandoned Lanchang (Lianchang) palace. He leaps over it and hides in one of the
ancient palace buildings. That night, as the moon is shining on the courtyard, he overhears three beautiful girls, Zhang Yunrong, Xiao Fengtai and Liu Lanqiao, talking about their hopes to find a husband. He steps out, introduces himself, and the girls play at dice to decide who will become Xue’s wife

The winner is Yunrong. She tells Xue her story: during the Kaiyuan years (713–741), she was a beloved servant of the emperor’s concubine, the famous Yang guifei. Serving the Daoist master Shen while he had tea and took his medicines, Yunrong asked him to tell her about the elixir of immortality. At first he refused, since he could foretell that she was destined to die young. But Yunrong cited Confucius’ words: “If one in the morning hears the right way, he may die in the evening without regret” (Legge 2009, 168; this citation also occurs in Du’s version) and insisted that she only wanted to hear about the Dao, and then would willingly die.

Moved by Yunrong’s eagerness, Shen tried to mitigate her destiny: he gave the girl a magic pill and told her that, after her death, her grave would have to be large, and a piece of jade would have to be placed in her mouth in order to prevent the dispersal of her celestial and earthly souls. Then, after one hundred years she would have to exchange seminal energy with a living man and, upon success, she would become an earthly immortal. Later, the dying Yunrong told the story to Yang guifei, who then helped make all the necessary arrangements for the funeral.

Since the one hundred years have already passed, Yunrong concludes that her meeting with Xue is predestined. As to her two ghost friends, Yunrong (or rather her visualized soul) explains that they are ghosts of court attendants poisoned by Xuan-zong’s younger sister, known as the Ninth Immortal Lady, who was jealous of their beauty.

A simple wedding ceremony follows during which Xue Zhao and Zhang Yunrong drink their nuptial cups, and all the damsels and Xue Zhao himself compose and recite fine verses. In these verses the otherworld where the three damsels exist is alluded to as a ‘dark valley’ (Liu Lanqiao calls herself ‘an oriole in the dark valley’, and Yunrong, the only one who hopes to be revived, says that now she ‘sees spring leaves on a branch in the dark valley’).

After the crow of the rooster, the newlyweds go to the bride’s room the doors of which are unusually small; however, the room itself is vast and neat, with female attendants standing still (this must be a reference to funerary ceramic sculptures, which used to be buried with the deceased). After a few nights and days spent there, Yunrong says that now her body is alive once again, but, in order to rise from the coffin, she will need a new dress. She gives Xue two golden bracelets (apparently the guifei’s gift) and sends him to the nearest town to buy her a dress. She also gives him a headscarf that can make him invisible, as Xue Zhao still is a wanted criminal.

As he comes back with the new clothes, Yunrong asks him to open the coffin. When Xue Zhao does so, he finds her body alive. Before they leave, he realizes that the sepulchre is in fact a burial room full of funeral objects such as clothes, jewellery and ceremonial statues. So the couple take some precious ornaments and go to Jinling (modern Nanjing), where they have lived up to this day without showing any signs of old age.
Daoist Shen Yuanzhi is invited by emperor Xuan-zong to the capital city. Once there, he as well as other Daoist masters meet the emperor quite often. [At this point there is a nostalgic parenthetical remark about the popularity of Daoism in those days.] On a trip to Sichuan along with the emperor and the guifei, one of the guifei’s attendants, named Zhao Yunrong, asks him for immortality. The Daoist, however, tells the girl that she is destined to die young. She nevertheless is eager to learn about the way of immortals, so finally Shen gives her a magic pill and tells her to swallow it as soon as she feels that her end is near (the name of the magic pill coincides with that in Pei Xing’s version). Shen then continues by telling her of the procedures to be followed (the same method as described in Pei’s version), calling it ‘Taiyin lianxing’ (Refining the body through the Great Yin) – there is, however, no mention of energy exchange with a living person in this case. By following all these instructions, she will, according to him, awake after a hundred years and will become an earthly immortal. After another hundred years she will have the opportunity to live in the Daoist sub-terrestrial paradise (lit. ‘grotto heaven’).

And so at Lanchang palace, on her way to the Eastern capital (Luoyang), Yunrong is struck by a terminal disease which eventually kills her. Afterwards, all the arrangements for her revival are fulfilled with the assistance of the sympathetic guifei. After a slumber that last for a hundred years, at the end of the Yuanhe era, Yunrong awakes. Shen continues to visit the human world, but now under the name of master Tian (cf. Old Tian in Pei Xing’s version).

II. The supposed common origin of the two versions

Themes such as the alchemical quest for immortality and the marriage with the ghost of a semi-dead girl seem to be purely Chinese. However, surprisingly, some aspects of these stories are closer to the tale of the brothers Grimm than to the known medieval European versions (de Vries 1959; Zago 1979 and 1983; Huot 2007, 163–167; Fernández Rodríguez 1998, 19–34). For example, in the *Roman de Perceforest*, in *Blandin de Cornoalha* and in *Frayre de Joy e Sor de Plaser* the sleep of the damsel is comparatively short. Early European versions do not contain the motif of the forest as an obstacle, though enchanted Brianda sleeps in her palace in the garden. In the *Roman de Perceforest*, Troylus and Zellandine are acquainted and fall in love with each other before she is overcome by magic slumber; Sor de Plaser has heard of Frayre de Joye before she falls to sleep, too.
In her article about sleep in early Chinese literature, Antje Richter (2003, 24) mentions the absence of the Sleeping Beauty theme in China. It is possible that the attitude of the Chinese towards sleep caused the transformation of this folktale type, turning the magical slumber into temporary death.

Pei Xing may have borrowed material for his “Marvellous Tales” from more laconic stories by his contemporaries, as he did in the case of the tale of Chen Luanfeng, the ‘victor of the thunder god’, the plot of which is obviously taken from the “Chen Yi” story, written by Fang Qianli (ca. 840); later both “Chen Yi” and “Chen Luanfeng” were included in the 394th juan of TPGJ.

In modern editions of “Chuanqi”, the entry that in TPGJ is called “Zhang Yunrong”, is entitled “Xue Zhao zhuan” (Tale about Xue Zhao); according to Li Jianguo (1993, 867), this is the original name of the Pei Xing’s story.

Here we may venture a hypothesis: perhaps the meeting with Old Tian is a kind of reward for Xue Zhao’s beneficial act (supposing that Master Shen was sent by the deceased father of the man whom Xue Zhao had set free, as in ATU 505).

This may be an allusion to the habit of the emperor Xuan-zong who asked his concubines to cast dice, and accordingly chose the winner as his night companion; cf. Tao Gu 2007, 13.

The vague mention of the Ninth Immortal Lady, or Yuzhen princess (she is known as one of the two Tang princesses who have become Daoist nuns), may be a reflection of the female antagonist in the supposed oral source.